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The Minister is Lay: Social Organization in New Paradigm Christianity¹

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Love seems to be in the air for many of the red-shirted members of Hope Filipino. On this particular Sunday afternoon, the church-owned Nexus Auditorium, located in a shopping center in Singapore's prominent Orchard Road, conveys the vibrancy of Valentine's season. Instead of a familiar Christian song, setting the mood for the inflowing audience is one of Kenny G's romantic hits, a tangible indication that this is not ordinary church. The Sunday service, redesigned for evangelistic purposes, expects a greater number of non-Christian visitors as a result of the pre-Valentine Matthew Care Group². With friends meeting and ushers greeting at the front door, the auditorium is in a warm atmosphere.

A new form of Protestant Christianity is gaining influence in many parts of urbanizing Asia today. But it remains overlooked by the academe. Considering the rapid growth of many of these churches in America, Miller (1997) is convinced that this culturally adaptive form of Christianity is bound to shape the future of the faith. Precipitated by the global movement of believers and such cultural forms as music and literature it has influenced, the rise of new paradigm churches in many parts of the world – Asia included – becomes increasingly visible (see Miller 1997; Miller 1998; Connell 2005; Cruz 2006; Cornelio 2006). Seoul, Manila, Bangkok, and Singapore are some of the Asian cities sheltering new paradigm churches today. But as the available literature mainly looks at the Western experience (see Miller 1997; Miller 1998; Connell 2005; Cruz 2006), this becomes a notable inquiry for academics observing religion in Asia.

By looking more closely at a new paradigm congregation in Singapore, this research attempts to one, provide a more enriching perspective on the rather limited material on new paradigm

¹ This paper was presented at "The Sacred in a Global City: Symposium on Religion in Singapore" at the National Museum of Singapore on March 10, 2007. The symposium was organized by the Asia Research Institute and Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, which aim to publish a volume compiling the presentations. The author, currently a PhD student in the sociology of religion at the National University of Singapore, is grateful to Dr. Mathew Guest of the University of Durham for his critical comments on the initial draft of this paper. All correspondences can be directed at j.cornelio@nus.edu.sg.

² In the week before, the small care groups conducted their respective pre-Valentine celebrations to which non-Christian friends were invited. The objective was not to expose the invitees to any Gospel presentation but merely to build new friendships with them. Such informal gathering was aptly called Matthew Care Group in allusion to the invitation Jesus made to Matthew to follow him, after which they had dinner at the latter's house. Recognizing the festive nature of Filipinos, the gathering revolved around food and parlor games.

Christianity with specific emphasis on its social organization, and two, bring into academic discourse its contextualization within Asian modernity. The highly accessible social organization is characterized by a blurred distinction between clergy and laity, with the latter fulfilling many, if not all, important ministerial functions. New paradigm Christianity, in this sense, presents itself as a radical progression from the routinized forms of charisma one can anticipate in mainline Protestantism. The most pertinent sociological question deals with the ability of new paradigm Christianity to facilitate leadership development among its lay members so effectively that the church becomes central to the life-decisions of its adherents. How is church involvement viewed by its faithful? Do certain beliefs, principles, or thoughts condition social action within the congregation? What kind of social organization materializes out of these dynamics? A critical consideration is new paradigm Christianity's promise of a postmodern reintegration of the profane with the sacred, a dichotomy generally reinforced by modernist consciousness in liberal Protestantism. Ensuing this reintegration is the empowering rereading of the belief in the individual priesthood of believers, which is further explained in light of late modernity or postmodernity.

Enriching the current literature is the unique positionality of this research's empirical subject – a congregation of overseas professionals in a commercially advanced society. The analysis draws from the experience of Hope Filipino Singapore, a congregation subsumed under 2,500-strong Hope Church Singapore, which belongs to a missionary-sending new paradigm movement that originated in Bangkok, Thailand. At nine years, Hope Filipino sees more than 500 attending its Sunday service and weekly care group and discipleship activities. A couple of members and leaders are non-Filipinos, particularly those that pioneered the congregation. Though young, it is determined to bring 1,000 Filipinos into church by 2007. Relative to the empirical subjects examined in the existing literature, the congregation's small yet increasing membership base presents an opportunity for a systematically closer analysis of its social organization. I conducted interviews with individuals carefully selected to provide balanced representation based on gender, leadership position, and length of stay in the church. A participant observation of a Sunday service also forms part of the fieldwork.

CHARACTERIZING NEW PARADIGM CHRISTIANITY

As it adheres to the fundamental principle of the individual priesthood of believers, new paradigm Christianity remains rooted in the Protestant faith. It, however, deviates from the established means and operations of mainline denominational Christianity. Services, for example, are typically held in commercial auditoriums replete with elements of middle-to-upper class urbanity – high tech equipment, social lounges, bookshops, and cafeteria (Connell 2005; Cruz 2006). The symbolic significance of altars, rituals, and even liturgy is giving way to a decidedly more down-to-

earth and bodily experience³ of the sacred. Denominationalism, to its believers, has routinized Christianity, stripping divine potential off the faith. For this, Miller (1998) believes that the movement is calling for postdenominationalism. Rejecting liturgical traditionalism and clerical hierarchy, elements that have become Christianity's historical attributes, new paradigm believers are reappropriating in the contemporary setting the principles and models of doing church as exemplified in the New Testament. However important they may be, the most visible distinction is not in the doctrinal positions but in the operations of the church. Nevertheless, in spite of the glaring differences, new paradigm Christians may speak of their unity with other Protestant Christians.

"The revolution that is transforming the Protestant landscape does not have to do with the content of Christianity so much as it does with the envelope in which it is placed. The gospel being preached is biblical and rooted in the first century, but the medium of presentation is contemporary and postmodern. In the place of organs and choirs are bands and singers...The hierarchical structures of decision making...have been radically simplified to encourage members to act in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit...(Miller 1998: 197)"

Simply put, it is a contemporary religious movement within Protestantism that reappropriates without compromising Biblical teachings by subjecting itself and its practices to continuous reinvention for social relevance. Its churches are often characterized by an upbeat worship style, a flat social organization, and a Christ-centered doctrinal leaning (Miller 1998). Increasingly integrated into the organizational schema are many aspects of community-building such as education, counseling, and family and welfare. The concept includes in its scope seeker-sensitive megachurches and congregations belonging to networks of apostolic churches that usually deemphasize their denominational roots.

With the ensuing characteristics of new paradigm Christianity in mind, one can recognize that terminologies such as Pentecostalism, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, or Charismatic Christianity (often used by many observers) may not sufficiently encompass the complexity of the phenomenon (Miller 1998). These, hopefully, will bring to the forefront the concept's uniqueness and utility.

To begin, in new paradigm Christianity, *worship* is understood as singing, dancing, and uttering one's praises and love for the Divine as natural response to the sacred that is at work in the profane. Accompanying worship is music that tends to be highly contemporary. With lyrics projected on big screens, the songs are upbeat and usually arranged with a complete set of instruments and voices. Many of these songs are by in-house composers, making the emotional experience favorably relevant. These songs also travel the world and are often adopted by other new paradigm congregations. Noticeable here is the departure from hymnals and solemnity that characterize many of the declining traditional denominations today. While the contemporary nature

³ For a discussion of bodily experience in contemporary Christianity, see Luhrmann 2004.

of worship may be seen as spectacle and capitalist-driven as Cruz (2006) argues, Miller (1998: 201) contends that “[t]he goal is worship [and] not performance.”

Another new paradigm distinctive is the emphasis on *practical theology*. Christ-centeredness in theology means the applicability of Christ’s directives in one’s life. Preaching is usually expository, expounding on the relevance of Scriptures in one’s life: “[T]hey pray for the sick and expect miracles, they cast out demons and anticipate mental healing, and they seek encounters with God through visions, dreams and prophetic utterance by members of the community” (p. 203). Again, these practices mirror new paradigm Christianity’s principle that the sacred is at work in the profane. In addition, these Christians are considered doctrinal minimalists as they give primary attention to the most important evangelical aspect of establishing and maintaining a personal relationship with Christ. “Their focus is on retelling the narratives of the Bible and seeking analogues to the experience of their members. So long as one subscribes to the basic teachings of Jesus and the practice of the early Christians, there is room for debate on the details of interpretation” (p. 203). Pastors then may be expected to cap their preaching with an invitation to church visitors to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Maturity is dependent on the individual’s spiritual discipline in matters such as reading the Scriptures and fellowshiping with the brethren. This, however, does not mean that doctrine is totally open to variegated interpretation. Looking at the available statements of faith among new paradigm churches, the Bible is generally read from a conservative (even literal) Protestant viewpoint.

Following the lead of their first century forerunners, new paradigm Christians implement a *social organization* that allows for participation by the members. Frequent interaction is necessary for spiritual growth, hence the prevalence of small group meetings often called care group, home fellowship, or mini-church. Usually organized based on interests and needs, these weekly Bible study sessions are considered the core of the church. Miller observes that in the care group, members “share each other’s burdens, comfort one another, rejoice in each other’s victories, and acknowledge their dependency by reaching out to grasp one another, dissolving the separation on which autonomous, self-sufficient modern urbanites so pride themselves” (p. 205). New paradigm Christianity is restoring the intimacy that ritualism and hierarchy have taken away from the faith. Correspondingly, the top-down bureaucracy that typifies denominational Christianity is being challenged by the responsive involvement visible in the new paradigm setting. Lay members are delegated ministerial functions. Ministries may be founded by ordinary members who believe God has called them to lead a new group. In fact, pastoral education from seminaries is not a prerequisite to enter the leadership structure. Clergy responds by honoring lay initiative and offering “clerical support as needed, without overregulating and thereby denting enthusiasm for a project” (p. 205). In addition, “[p]rofessional degrees are not so important as someone who has demonstrated his or her sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit” (p. 206).

The Filipino congregation that is the empirical focus of this paper emerged as an initiative by a female Chinese Singaporean who was both member and employed accountant of Hope Church

Singapore nearly a decade ago. With a team of fellow non-Filipinos, Christie began evangelizing Filipino professionals, most of whom were female nurses. This approach would ensure sustainability of the organization because of the professionals' availability, as opposed to domestic helpers often restricted by their employment arrangements. When the congregation eventually increased in size, Christie decided to quit the job as accountant and be fulltime as pastor. The members of her pioneering team and their initial Filipino converts now form the upper bracket of the social organization, here understood as the leadership structure. The original guitarist, for example, is now leading the entire music team. Nevertheless, they are still working as fulltime professionals outside the church.

Hope Filipino reflects the lay accessibility of the organizational structure in many new paradigm churches. Ministerial leadership is developed from the ranks as employment of ministers from the outside is eschewed. Here, the minister is ultimately lay. It is the aim of this research to elucidate on the dynamics surrounding this phenomenon. Though it has gained certain level of prominence in many societies today, the limited discussion on new paradigm Christianity – let alone the unique internal structure it fosters – has kept the usefulness of its conceptualization at a minimum.

HOPE FILIPINO AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

With this theoretical gap in mind, a perceptive understanding of the highly accessible social organization at Hope Filipino can begin by unraveling the congregation's new paradigm character manifest in the Sunday service. Evident is the preference for an engaging atmosphere, emotional worship, and minimalist theology – elements indicative of a social organization that facilitates lay participation.

The Sunday Service

Accentuating the populist atmosphere of Hope Filipino's Valentine service are the informally dressed musicians and two female programme hosts who start the event with – distinctively – a parlor game. Divided into groups according to seats, the audience is instructed to pass on balloons to the most number of people, the winner of which is awarded a prize. By this time, the 700 or so seats of the auditorium are more than half-filled. The two MCs, speaking in English but with characteristically Filipino accent, then ask the audience to "impart God's overflowing love by welcoming one another." Though the audience is arranged based on the organizational district to which one's care group belongs, others ecstatically get out of their seats to embrace friends from other areas of the crowd. Warmth describes the audience's dynamics. Moreover, if one were to judge from appearance and the company one is with, the distinction between occupations does not surface. The Filipinos in attendance are mostly rank-and-file professionals in health, engineering, and information

technology; a minimal fraction is composed of domestic helpers. Considering the educational and professional background, membership is generally located within the wide lower and middle class strata of Philippine society.

The service features an upbeat praise and worship session led by a band and a group of vocalists. Projected on the screen are the lyrics, with a pink heart forming the backdrop. With hands raised, worship leaders and the audience utter spontaneous praises creating a seemingly cacophonous atmosphere radically divergent from the liturgical practice of silence, which many in the congregation had been used to as former Catholics. All six songs in the repertoire are taken from the recent albums of Hillsong, a new paradigm congregation in Australia.

As if one hour of music is not enough, some of the promising vocalists render songs in line with the Valentine festivity. With the audience now seated, neither of the two songs delivered, however, is directed to the holy. The first, performed by a married couple, emulates two of the Philippines's well-known secular singers while the second, "I Turn to You," is by a trio of women. The songs appropriately preempt the pastor's preaching on "Love and Friendship."

The very choice of topic suggests that as a new paradigm congregation, Hope Filipino emphasizes applicability in individual circumstances. Among all pastors who preach to the Filipino congregation, this male Chinese Singaporean is recognized for his ability to engage with the audience and balance profuse humor and seriousness during his sermon. Wearing long-sleeved shirt and black trousers, the pastor punctuates his sermon with such appeals as "Tell the person next to you..." or "Wave your hands if you want to..." At his count, Biblical verses projected on the screen are read aloud by the audience. Rhetorical questions, whether seeking a positive or negative response, are answered with a resounding "amen!" by the congregation. Apparently, "amen" is used either as a means of soliciting response by the pastor or an answer by the congregation that is flexibly affirmative or negating.

During the preaching, clerical hierarchy is not emphasized. The engaging mood is complemented by the use of "friends" more frequently than "brothers and sisters" to address the crowd. And serious matters are interwoven with jokes, if only to make the sharp point rather tolerable. "Are there people that you find hard to accept? Don't look at your seatmate lest you be obvious. Look at me straight. Pretend..." Light humor, hoping to underscore his point about mere "liking" as opposed to "loving," is thrown at his fellow pastor: "If you're into soccer, come to me, I like you. If you're into ballet and shopping, do not come to me. I don't like you. Go to...Christie," who happens to be the overseeing pastor of the Filipino congregation. The non-use of "Pastor" to address the latter suggests that formal recognition of hierarchical authority is downplayed.

Though it appears irrelevant to the preacher's over-all topic, there is the repetitive utterance of what the Filipino congregation must envision itself to be. Whenever exhortations are delivered, the tone becomes palpably serious.

“In our church, we want to build deep friendship...We want to grow our church bigger and smaller at the same time...bigger in the sense that we want more people to come to know Christ and smaller in the sense that we want our care groups to love and know one another.”

To illustrate his point, the pastor picks up the testimony of a Chinese family with Hope Church’s adult congregation. With pictures flashed on screen, the preacher recounts the experience of the only child who suffered brain hemorrhage from an accident. He then underscores the quick response of the care group to accompany the family. The story of the family’s conversion to Christ and the joy they experienced in the company of the believers strikes a chord among Filipinos, many of whom do not have their families with them in Singapore.

By this time, the emotional environment is ready for the pastor’s urge that “You need to get connected to a care group.” There is, however, a disclaimer. “But we do fail one another because we are sinful and finite in resources. If you see something wrong with your care group, be patient just as Christ was patient with you.” The pastor ends the story by revealing that the boy recuperated without trauma. “Let’s thank the Lord.” And the congregation applauds in response.

Praying at the end of his sermon, the pastor requests the crowd to “bow down your heads and close your eyes.” With soft worship music in the background, appeals are rendered to the congregation. In this atmosphere where guilt of sins is built up, it is emphasized that the visitor’s decision is between him and the Lord. If he wants to accept the Lord, which is effectively the conversion process, “please raise your hand.” Upon the pastor’s signal, willing newcomers are accompanied by members to the front where several lay leaders, mostly women, are waiting to pray with them individually in order to “receive the Lord.”

Social Organization and the Individual Priesthood of Believers

The employment of populist language and low-key imagery to engage the audience signals an intriguing state of religion in contemporary society. Not one physical object in the venue harks back to traditional religion. Even the preacher’s pulpit is no more elaborate than a music stand. The auditorium, which is in itself already unorthodox for worship, is decorated still to suit the Valentine theme. In the context of Hope Filipino, warmth and cultural resonance emanate from the belief in the individual priesthood of believers whereby God is both accessible and immersed in the affairs of His people – the sacred active in the profane. The proceedings counter the sophistication of denominational Sunday religion wherein the pageantry of symbols speaks of a distant divine that demands formal procedures. The upbeat programme is a shot at making church and God relevant to the overseas Filipino, perceived to be relational and high-spirited (see Gonzalez & Maison, 2004).

Consequently, the light, engaging, and relational atmosphere in the company of believers tempers the feeling of guilt and ushers in a sense of hope within the newcomer. This accounts for the importance of the community in new paradigm Christianity. Although the Sunday service may act as

the congregation's "front door" to visitors, many of the first-timers in the crowd are first invited to the different care groups or small group gatherings, what my interviews reveal to be the "side door." One avenue, as mentioned at the onset, is the Matthew Care Group. Hence, many of the first-timers are already accompanied by members. In new paradigm Christianity, the care group, which is relational in nature, is most essential to community. Correspondingly, the Sunday service reinforces the relationships created in the care group. Miller (1998:203) points out that "[f]eelings of hope, the possibility of forgiveness, and the option of being part of a nurturing community led them [his interviewees] to consider the teaching that framed what they were experiencing."

In this light, the act of receiving the Lord, inasmuch as the pastor preaches that it is between the individual and the Lord, is not in its strictest sense private. The repetitive exhortation to integrate oneself in the care group is closely linked with the supportive function of the fellowship to accompany the individual through his behavioral conversion process. On one hand, the newcomer has already verbalized his conversion through the sinner's prayer in which he "received the Lord." On the other hand, he has to exhibit that in his actions. The care group is the support system, wherein participation in the social organization begins. Interestingly, the condition of these Filipino converts as foreigners in Singapore is also seen in other contexts. An account of the social functions of the care group among Korean immigrants in the United States verifies the emotional support that the fellowship is able to provide to newcomers (Kwon, Ebaugh, & Hagan 1997).

In addition, the identity of lay leaders praying for people during the altar call speaks of the congregation that is the flat or highly accessible social organization. Like the newcomers, they are full-time employees in Singapore; their ordinariness cannot be denied. Subsumed under their lay identity and casual appearance is their clerical or more contextually, spiritual authority. Like the use of populist language and low-key imagery in the service, this also creatively mirrors new paradigm Christianity's adoption of the Protestant faith that the sacred is active in the profane. These lay pastoral leaders have advanced in the congregation's organizational structure as they, among many other considerations, demonstrated effectiveness in leading groups of people. With ordinary people praying for fellow ordinary individuals, access to the sacred is seen here as democratically available. Praying with confidence, without the hassle of priestly and ceremonious mediation, turns out to be a right available to the entire community.

The Sunday service thus becomes a capstone programme that integrates the individual with the rest of the congregation and at the same time reinforces the identity of the congregation in the consciousness of the individual, newcomer or otherwise. The spontaneous manner of worship, the interactive atmosphere in the congregation, and the involvement of the lay as ministers all point to the new paradigm reappropriation of the belief in the individual priesthood of believers as the sacred is believed to be decidedly accessible to the community of ordinary individuals.

"The truth to which new paradigm Christians commit their lives is based on the original gospel, rather than emphasizing twenty centuries of interpretation and

rationalization. For them, the appeal of the simple worship of the first-century church is that it was not conditioned by professional clergy, by specialists in managing access to the sacred. Those early Christian radicals worshiped in house churches, where very little doctrine had evolved and a complex liturgy, artfully constructed by professional priests, had not yet been born. New paradigm pastors identify with these first-century Jesus followers, who were seeking a more direct relationship with God" (Miller 1997: 145-146).

The attempt to relive the ways of the early church is seen in how the principle of the individual priesthood of believers is being reread in populist terms. The vision of new paradigm Christians lies in restoring the spontaneity and straightforwardness of accessing the sacred which the Protestant Reformation introduced but lost to an extended season of routinization. Evident are the engaging programme and practical theology. And in addition, new paradigm Christians welcome a radical form of leadership development, characterized by the participation of the lay in doing church. The principle then is being reappropriated from an empowering standpoint. The lay, without undergoing stringent measures of religious training, plays central role – in fact, even preaching and congregational oversight. Here, Hope Filipino becomes an agent of change remodeling Christianity in a culturally responsive form that creatively integrates the essence of the Protestant faith.

For this, Hope Filipino, not very much unlike other new paradigm congregations, employs a systematic leadership configuration that oversees different levels of membership development. Except for the pastor, everyone in the leadership is lay and working as professionals in Singapore. At the micro level, a *shepherd* acts as a personal "discipler" to another individual who necessarily belongs to a care group. This arrangement cuts across the entire congregation from the pastor down. Members deemed to have matured in the faith begin taking part in the leadership process as shepherd to another individual, usually, a new convert. The care group, composed of no more than twenty individuals, is headed by a *care leader* who coordinates the activities of the group and facilitates Bible discussion⁴. Overseeing two to three care groups is a *unit leader* who reports to a *sub-district leader*. Further up, the *district leader* directs the growth and internal activities carried out at the care group level. She reports to the pastor who sets the direction for the entire congregation. The *pastor* and some of the district leaders regularly deliver the Sunday sermon.

What was just described pertains to the pastoral leadership configuration. Individuals can also take part in specialized groupings as a way of participating in the church's social organization. Examples include the music ministry and the multimedia and technical teams. Since these are functional involvements deemed secondary to the more important aspect of spiritual growth one can adopt from shepherding and the care group, I focus on the dynamics of leadership existing in the pastoral structure. Individuals, in any case, are enjoined to commit first to their respective pastoral groupings where evangelism also effectively takes place (see Cornelio 2006).

⁴ At the time of my fieldwork, there are about 36 existing care groups.

While the structure reflects bureaucratization, the principle that governs the appointment, promotion, and conduct of leaders is not completely dependent on instrumental rationality present in routinized forms of Protestant Christianity. Participation as a leader involves personal readiness and willingness as it is expected to demand time and resources in running the Sunday service, coordinating care groups, shepherding individuals, and planning with fellow leaders, among many other responsibilities that span one's work week. Pastor Christie reveals:

"In Hope Movement, we don't go by title or education. We are going by our function. In Hope Churches, we don't employ pastors. A person who graduated from seminary doesn't qualify to become pastor. Rather pastor is a title given the function. I'm the one leading the Filipino so naturally because of the people following me, in terms of leadership, and I oversee the spiritual welfare of the people, functionally I'm a pastor. Initially, I was employed as a church accountant...[but] in 1996 I pioneered the Filipino community until eventually it crossed the 200 mark. And I felt that I need more time to lead the Filipino group. So I was released from my administrative role to fully pastor the Filipino congregation. In a way, I was given the title because of the function. So if one day I'm not leading the Filipino people anymore, I will not be carrying the title anymore."

The local pastor's explanation offers insights on the way leadership is viewed and defined at Hope Filipino. Since leadership is considered a calling, the abilities an individual possesses do not secure ministerial effectiveness, let alone a title. Clearly, the title is obtained once a function is fully established, not after a methodical training program is accomplished. And across the interviews with leaders, a leadership function is bestowed on one based on *character*, understood to be the attitudes and willingness concerning "serving in the church". Cited in the interviews are many examples of testing individuals on how they respond to "serving in the church" by assigning them leadership responsibilities over projects at the care group, district, or even church level. After having exhibited acceptable behavioral responses one is "challenged" to take on a leadership position by other leaders. Important to take note, however, is that the inadequacy of skills to function properly is compensated for by training and on-the-job learning within the church. A female district leader, a Malaysian of Chinese descent, justifies this philosophy:

"Character, for example, teachability [and] submission...It seems easy. But we search for character because character cannot be trained. If the person has a lot of skills and abilities, but is not teachable, it is hard for us to entrust to the person another life...[We guide our people] through the lives of our people. For example, through your shepherd. If the people can see a role model, they realize it is possible to happen in their lives. It's about life testimony. Hey, God is working in this person's life, so it is possible for God to work in me as well."

The justification for the preference for the character of teachability over skills is that it is essential to the responsibility of guiding the spiritual growth process of other individuals. Furthermore, to recognize character as more important than skills in the church is to reject secular achievement, for example professional ones, in considering the appointment of leaders. Effectively,

the congregation eliminates one's social status outside the church as a criterion by which to delineate membership and leadership. Here, the social organization at Hope Filipino is not only highly accessible to the lay but is also a democratizing institution that allows the fulfillment of spiritual potential based on a religious standard, which is effectively a mechanism that ascertains the individual's personal alignment with the values and identity of the congregation. This speaks of conformity in beliefs and practices that democratizes involvement in the congregation. Consequently, one may be an executive at the workplace but still be barred from taking up leadership responsibilities because of character issues. Conversely, an ordinary health care assistant can become a care leader himself because of his own attitudinal readiness. Helen, a female domestic helper, is leader of a care group mainly composed of working professionals:

"It was not initially my will to become a leader. They said, leaders appoint, God anoints. Perhaps they saw that I was consistent, willing to be used by God. I was not satisfied with being saved. I was willing to do something for God although I was not as skilled as others...If you look at my care group, they are professionals. Sometimes I get discouraged because I am not like them in terms of educational background. But my leaders looked beyond my weakness because they know there is God working through me."

Despite having asserted his willingness to assume leadership responsibilities, a male member, who was already a leader in his former church in the Philippines, has been refused for many times because of the impression that he lacks the value of submission.

"During that time, I was pushing myself to lead in a ministry. Until finally, I resigned from that desire. 'Lord, I am perpetually delighting myself to you. Why are you not giving the desire of my heart?' I felt the Lord telling me, 'Might your desire be wrong?' So I resigned from my desire to lead. You can't blame me. I was a leader in my church before coming here. I was preaching and all of a sudden, I couldn't even volunteer myself to usher people during the service. They told me that only core team can volunteer. I also volunteered for the worship team, but I received the same answer. Is that something scriptural? You have no right to ask that, one of the leaders told me. You don't have any right to question the leaders because they were chosen."

Recalling the pastor's evocative language in the Sunday service, the idea of building a relationship with God is in effect the act of committing oneself to the community of believers. Within this relationship with fellow believers is the objective of allowing each individual to progress spiritually, that is having character flaws corrected, potentialities discovered, and beliefs internalized. Through the process of discipleship whereby a lay leader mentors another individual (through shepherding and care group, for example), conformity is attained with regards to a more conservative theological position that conditions social action (colloquially, spiritual maturity).

Here, the same motivation that compels individuals to participate in leadership is the same conviction that prevents one from detaching from the social organization. The idea of the community becomes in itself a form of social control effectively internalized. In the words of a male care leader,

“the best thing about being a leader is that you have the guarantee that you are not going to fall. Because the moment that you are down and you see the people you are taking care of very enthusiastic, you will always be inspired. And so ask yourself, what am I doing here? Then it brings you back again.”

As Hope Filipino commits to the church’s vision of “discipling all nations,” each member’s potential in leading another individual is predominantly recognized. Thus, leadership is better understood in light of interpersonal relationships in which is fostered the believers’ spiritual maturity. Participation in the leadership structure, say as a shepherd first or a care leader’s assistant, becomes idealized within the congregation.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

As foreign workers, the members of Hope Filipino are precariously situated in what Tan (1999: 46, italics in the original) recounts as Singapore’s process of economic rationalization that has fashioned a “local culture where the *methodization of consciousness*...now attempts to subsume all.” In his work on Singapore, Tan contends that the language being employed in the everyday operations of many aspects of the society increasingly reflects that of formal rationality, resulting from the deliberate effort for survival when Singapore was born as an accidental state in 1965. The principles of formal rationality involving meritocracy, technocracy, quantification, and credentialism that fuelled the economy’s development have been transposed to many areas of public life – the methodization of consciousness. To Tan (p. 44), “the ‘rule of desk’ has penetrated into...numerous social institutions such as the institutions of marriage; the family; religion; culture; the arts and politics.”

As a result, the highly rationalized society fails to offer a relevant support system especially to a foreign worker such as the Filipino, a point taken up in human geographic studies in Singapore (see Wong 1998 and Zhang 2005). Substantiating this is the engagement of discourses between the Filipino as a migrant agent and Singapore as the economic institution. In this context foreign to him, the Filipino, conditioned by the aspirations for upward mobility (see Oishi 2005) is faced with different and potentially divergent value systems: *Singapore is a meritocratic secular state; It is highly developed; Its wealth is key to upward mobility; It opens greater opportunities elsewhere; But it is highly disciplined; It cannot tolerate dissension.* Interfacing with these are the subjectivities of the Filipino: *I am a migrant worker; My ethnicity is Others (as opposed to standard Chinese, Malay, and Indian), I come from a poor country; But I have a degree; I have the responsibility of supporting my family back home.* Singapore, as my interviewees reveal, is often seen as springboard for better career opportunities in the West.

The aspiration for upward mobility coupled with employment in shift-based 24/7 industries such as manufacturing, shipping, and healthcare compels the Filipino to consider Sunday ordinarily. This suggests a transgression in the lives of many Filipinos whose family and religious affairs in the

Philippines normally take place on Sundays. With these considerations in mind, the promise of “meaning” or order that is within the domain of religion is detached from the Filipino worker. The project of religious identity construction within a rationalizing society is overwhelmingly vulnerable to what Goh (1999: 91) describes as Singapore’s transcendentalization of consciousness, whereby “[s]ocial reality becomes one that is beyond the individual’s grasp, understanding and control.” A rank-and-file professional in a less demanding workplace may opt for longer work periods – including Sunday – because of overtime premium. But another individual working in a more intensive environment, though wanting to keep Sunday sacred, has a limited say on the schedule assigned to him. The interplay of subjectivities between the individual’s priority for work and the industry’s institutional demands leads to the de-emphasis of issues of spirituality or religion for the Filipino.

In response, new paradigm churches, as in the case of Hope Filipino, are uniquely contextualized to subject the self to a reflexive project that attempts to recapture fundamental issues of identity for the individual. Other observers may see the snobbery of capitalism such as Connell (2005: 33) who describes Hillsong Australia as a “church without humility or mystery, without learning or dignity: superficially egalitarian, populist and popular, and inherently materialist and anti-intellectual.” Such conclusion forcefully develops from an analysis that calls attention to institutional forces, but overlooks important dimensions of human relationships available in say, shepherding and care groups (i.e. participation in the social organization). In this light, Hope Filipino most effectively connects with professionals who have relative control of their time, which then explains the prevalence of professionals and the minority of domestic helpers whose movement is often constrained by employers. Building on Miller’s discussion, I argue that the relevance of new paradigm Christianity in contemporary society is in recognizing the fragility of the self, a persistent issue in discussions of late modernity and postmodernity (Bauman 1992; Giddens 1991; Beckford 1996; Lyon 2000).

“...[N]ew paradigm churches represent the antithesis of the prevailing pop psychology culture, in which self-actualization and self-fulfillment are the highest values. According to this therapeutic ethic, the individual, not the community, is the center of value: accountability is to oneself; one is the master of one’s life; and giving oneself up to meet the demands of society represents inauthentic living. It is precisely this ethic that new paradigm Christians have found impoverished. In new paradigm groups, worship of self is replaced with worship of God, and meaning and purpose are rediscovered in communal bonds tempered by spirit-directed living” (Miller 1997: 151).

The use of high modernity (Giddens 1991) or postmodernity (Bauman 1992), two ideas that may be explained to coexist (Lyon 2000), to describe contemporary society allows us to make sense of new paradigm Christianity’s highly accessible social organization and its massive growth in Singapore and arguably in other commercially advanced societies. These concepts lend themselves to the Filipino’s engagement with the Singaporean society. The condition of high modernity, in that it is

“more difficult for individuals to cultivate a continuous thread of self-identity in the face of the endless mutability of time/space connections, the constant recombinations of social relationships out of context and the perpetual exposure of the self to fresh information about itself” (Beckford 1996: 34), is seen in the interface of divergent subjectivities between Singapore as an economic institution and the Filipino as a migrant worker. This results, according to Bauman (1992: xxii), in the “ethical paradox of the postmodern condition [that] restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised.”

For this, Hope Filipino’s social organization can be seen as a “negative response” to the “disintegration of authority and to the relatively autonomous ways in which fresh religious identities are put together” (Lyon 2000: 75). In high modernity, as opposed to one in a more stable traditional setting, the self “has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (Giddens 1991: 33). Reflexivity, one of the engines of high modernity’s dynamism, allows both agents and institutions to adopt new knowledge to transform existing identities and social arrangements. In Giddens’s (1991) discussion, reflexivity in high modernity links the formation of the self to expert systems such as pediatricians, therapists, and educators. In new paradigm Christianity, however, the reflexive formation of the self is not subjected to the expert systems of modernity but to the charisma of accessible leadership which responds to and relates with the modern condition. For one, it is because of reflexivity about the practice of the faith that these believers do not call for cultural separatism. In fact, the phenomenology of new paradigm Christianity speaks of cultural relevance. New paradigm Christians, believing in the working of the sacred in the profane, still work as professionals in the secular world. Secondly, it is because of reflexivity that the empowering social organization is conditioned by the “supra-individual” approval (Bauman 1992: xviii) of the Scriptures. Here, the rereading of the biblical principle of the *individual* priesthood of believers, whereby the lay can be involved in ministry, is paradoxically of a *communitarian* character that empowers the self, thus, addressing its imminent fragmentation. The lay character of the minister reflects the very accessibility of the sacred to the entire community. The sacred is active in the profane; the profane can access the sacred. Thirdly, while charismatic leadership emerges as a result of an individual’s decision to accept one’s calling, it is also a result of a developmental process that one undergoes based on a standard - spiritual meritocracy. Complementing the absence of leadership skills is training provided within the congregation. The modern tenet of meritocracy in human resources management is hereby retuned - and not rejected - to work for the democratizing congregation.

As a case of how the social organization has become a response to identity fragmentation, one female new member shares that in the month before the interview, she was offered a job with an equally competitive salary in the Philippines. Considering being with her family again, she consulted with her shepherd and other leaders who encouraged her to stay instead. She resolves that “in terms

of shepherding and teaching, the church here can provide more help. I will be more focused and I'd like to grow here in Singapore because this is where I also received Christ."

The principle of the individual priesthood of believers is being reintroduced as a response to the fragmentation of identity brought about by conditions of late modernity or postmodernity. The flat configuration of social actors within the congregation opens wider the doors of Christianity for more individuals to experience the divine. Non-believers are given access to the culturally adaptive community. Believers see themselves having bigger roles to play. For the massive decentralization process it introduces to contemporary religion which leads to greater involvement in society, Miller (1997) believes that new paradigm churches may be appropriately labeled as "postmodern sects":

"While new paradigm churches have some sectarian qualities, such as intensity of religious experience, they are not cultural separatists in the way scholars normally think about religious sects. Rather than calling their members away from cultural engagement, they actually appropriate many aspects of contemporary culture, transforming these aspects for their own purposes. In addition, these churches do not ask members to disassociate themselves from culture, but to see these associations as the vehicle for inviting a secular friend to radically change his or her life" (p. 154).

CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITY OF DURABILITY

In his book, Miller (1997) offers a historical sketch of the new paradigm congregations he studied in which he recounts how their pioneering leaders have, in one way or another, been influenced by the countercultural values of the Jesus Movement in 1960's US. This spiritual awakening saw its members gathering in public parks, worshipping in rock-and-roll, and attempting to build utopian Christian communities. The Movement is argued to have cultivated a *therapeutic*, *individualistic*, and *anti-establishment* worldview that remains intelligible today given the condition of contemporary society (Lyon 2000). The therapeutic environment facilitates the possibility "to relax, to be vulnerable, to admit to one's own hurts and problems, knowing that one would be accepted rather than judged" (Miller 1997: p. 21). The small groups, for one, allow for warm interaction among the participants. Also, new paradigm churches grant considerable space to individualism: "interpreting scripture for oneself, directly interacting with God through prayer and visions, and affirming personal salvation" (p. 21). But personal accountability is also important, which explains the thorough shepherding arrangements across the social organization. This way, biblical values are kept intact among the members. And finally, new paradigm operations are largely anti-establishment. Denominationalism demonstrates ritualism and hierarchy that warrant spiritual potency. Because of this, "they reject most of the external symbols of 'organized' religion as being false, oppressive, and of human origin. Their churches are unadorned by religious symbolism, and the professional staff is lean and easily accessible to members" (p. 22).

However, following Lyon (2000), new paradigm Christianity's adoption of a critical attitude towards institutionalized hierarchy may be seen to cultivate an environment of sustained and irreconcilable differences among its participants, leading to the breakdown of the movement itself. Guest and Taylor (2006) identify this as the dilemma intuitively imminent among self-confessed postmodern "Emerging Churches" in the West. While new paradigm Christianity and post-evangelicalism do not refer to the same phenomenon, they share the similar motivation of rejecting established practices in mainline Christianity. Particularly looking at the alternative worship phenomenon within the post-evangelical milieu, characterized by "a yearning for the holistic, open-ended, visual and provocative, alongside a discomfort with paternalistic authority structures, propositional notions of truth, and disengagement from contemporary culture," the authors delve into the issue of durability in the context of de-centering (2006: 60). The issue becomes more glaring given that the emerging church's service is necessarily unsettling, allowing for varied expressions of worship that may combine elements from both within and outside Christian tradition. In a UK emerging church, for instance, visual images without a coherent narrative are accompanied by trance music⁵.

To answer, what sustains the emerging church is not a stipulated doctrinal position as members engage from divergent sources of spirituality but the "commitment to embracing those marginalized by the mainstream evangelical church, to supportive community, to cultural engagement and to ritual experimentation" (p. 60). In an emerging church in New Zealand,

"identity is based on a narrative, which defines it as a community with reference to experiences of religious and contextual de-centredness...Authority has shifted, now located neither in scripture nor in tradition, but in the identity of the group as a community" (p. 59).

Reinforcing this communitarian identity is the church's Baptist roots, believing in the presence of Christ not in an individual entity but in the gathered congregation. This, interestingly, is an appropriation of the doctrine of the individual priesthood of believers.

But what this emerging church reads as possible justification for pastiche worship, new paradigm Christianity sees as a principle of empowerment without transgressing the authority of Scriptures. Whereas post-evangelicalism has a consciously de-centered doctrinal position as its own way of reconfiguring the practice of faith, new paradigm Christianity has reasserted the authority and relevance of the written Word. The principle of Christ-centeredness of teachings in new paradigm Christianity becomes the standard against which doctrines and personal interpretations of the Bible are tested. Indeed, new paradigm Christians are exhorted in church to engage in the discipline of individual Scriptural meditation especially for personal edification relative to one's circumstances, but the availability of such texts as the congregational statement of vision and faith and teaching resources for use in shepherding, care group, and other discipleship arrangements sets a doctrinal

⁵ For more on the Emerging Church, see Drane 2006 and Jamieson 2006.

perimeter albeit less vivid and comprehensive compared to that of mainline Protestantism. And these doctrinal positions are theologically conservative (Miller 1998). This, I hope, enriches Miller's (p. 203) rather limited statement that

"[s]o long as one subscribes to the basic teachings of Jesus and the practice of early Christians, there is room for debate on the details of interpretation. The goal is for members to have a personal relationship with Jesus, not to pledge allegiance to a particular catechism or doctrinal statement."

In addition, the social organization that is flat and highly accessible to the laity remains intelligibly structured and accounts for the durability and growth of the new paradigm congregation. Individual members identify with a shepherd and locate themselves in a care group, which is further organized according to a district and targeted interests. The accessibility of lay leaders in the flat social organization influencing the believers is critical to the life decisions they have made. Reinforced by the authority of the Bible, such accessibility is a powerful instrument of meaning, a tangible phenomenon through which an estranged individual may make sense of his social reality. Lyon (2000: 74) puts it aptly in stating that "[m]eaning is sought as a 'redemptive gospel' in consumption." The lay character of leaders effectively reflects the idea that access to the sacred does not require theological sophistication and ceremonial precision. That the minister is lay facilitates a reassuring environment for both the newcomer and the believer. With this, the community is fused with warm interaction, with leaders acknowledging the potential of each newcomer to mature spiritually and, conversely, with members appreciating the accessibility of the sacred. So despite the apparently blurred distinction between laity and clergy at Hope Filipino, the leadership is well recognized and respected. The threat of identity fragmentation is addressed; spiritual sensibility replaces societal estrangement.

The genius of new paradigm Christianity is in its ability to hark back to an authority of the past and to reconfigure well in a condition of identity fragmentation. Indeed, Woodhead and Heelas (2000: 495) propose that the future landscape of religions belong to "those which put people in touch with a God beyond self, make a difference, sustain supportive and affective communities, emphasize experience, have a political or economic job to do, and empower." Miller's (1997) argument that new paradigm Christianity has the potential to shape the future of the Christian faith seems to sit well with this proposition.

This paper finds its niche in the closer analysis of social organization within new paradigm Christianity particularly in Asia. While literature shows new paradigm churches mostly flourish in urbanized societies among local citizens, this paper has identified the ability of this form of reinvented Christianity not only to enfold but to create communities for migrants who flourish not merely as consumers but also as producers of religious meanings. This becomes intelligible once the socio-culturally responsive character of new paradigm Christianity is recognized, articulated in view of the belief in the active involvement of the sacred in the profane. This is further reinforced by the

empowering reappropriation in the social organization of the principle of the individual priesthood of believers.

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